

# **Defining War in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America**

**A Monograph  
by  
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## **Abstract**

Defining War in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America by MAJ William O. Hickok VI, U.S. Army, 48 pages.

It is dangerous to assume that in today's operating environment, a universally accepted definition of what war is, and what war is not, is readily available. While most Soldiers and policy makers claim to know war, "knowing it when they see it," is a precarious and superficial approach.

This monograph provides a framework for understanding why a comprehensive definition of war is so difficult for America to maintain, and so necessary in preparing for future conflict. The theories of Carl von Clausewitz are revisited in the context of the definition of war provided by Joint Publication 1 (JP-1), *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*. This monograph demonstrates the inadequacy of the *JP-1* definition and the superficial approach in applying Clausewitzian theory to a poorly structured definition. By analyzing the reason why Clausewitz is so conspicuously present at the beginning of the U.S. Military's capstone doctrinal document, it becomes possible to appreciate the difficulty in incorporating his theory into modern decision making. The monograph utilizes Clausewitzian theory to extract a definition of war that attempts to be at once both comprehensive and comprehensible.

Based upon the above, a recommendation is made that the United States military must incorporate a better structure for defining war. Educating both military and civilian leaders ultimately requires an educational process based on a definition anchored in proven theory instead of unproven rhetoric.

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## Introduction

In war more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On*

*War*.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

In March 2010, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, delivered a speech at Kansas State University where he stated,

There is no single defining American way of war. It changes over time, and it should change over time, adapting appropriately to the most relevant threats to our national security, and the means by which that security is best preserved. As the godfather of theory himself, Carl von Clausewitz, once observed, war is but an instrument of policy, beholden to it. And because policies change, the conduct of war must also change....frankly the battlefield isn't necessarily a field anymore. It's in the minds of the people.<sup>2</sup>

The essential nature of these comments is very similar to countless other statements made by senior officers and national leaders since the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> A constant emphasis revolves around how warfare is changing and how America must adapt to these changes. Debates rage over the use of precision, the implementation of new technologies, asymmetrical enemies, and other capabilities and threats that need addressing, normally in the context of organizational change and the changing nature of war. The arguments questioning the

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Admiral Michael G. Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks" (lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, March 03, 2010). JCS Website, <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1336> [Accessed 5 March 2010].

<sup>3</sup> The argument over the "change" occurring in warfare is not new but part of an eternal debate. However, the intensity of the argument is relative to a perceived crisis. A quick internet search at Google.com reveals hundreds of links to the subject of "The changing nature of warfare," the majority of which focus directly on emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century issues brought on by the Information Age, globalization, and the Global War on Terror.

changing nature of war leads to additional questions that are more basic. The most fundamental question at the core of these arguments is, what is grounding this debate on war? What ensures that America does not turn its concept of warfare into something that is alien to the nature of war itself? Does the United States maintain a definition of war that is at once comprehensive and comprehensible?

In 2001, the United States went to war. Supremely confident in its capability to wage a war to overwhelm any opponent, some within the United States military as well as civilian leadership bought into the idea that the nature of warfare fundamentally changed. Old conventions were either no longer appropriate, or subjectively applied, without cause for concern. A root cause of this change was a poor understanding and application of established war theory. So confident in new technology, and equally contemptuous of the perceived enemy, the United States rode the wave of a still unproven revolution in military affairs into a conflict today that is still poorly understood from a theoretical standpoint. Far from providing the decisive benefit so indisputably predicted, this revolution in military affairs achieved a significantly different and dangerous outcome.<sup>4</sup> It provided a rallying point for those caught up in debating peripheral notions, while masking America's failure to thoroughly analyze how the United States fights war in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In 2010, the United States finds itself in its tenth year of combat operations under the overarching banner of the Global War on Terror (GWOT).<sup>5</sup> The intention of this term was to

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<sup>4</sup> Kris Osborn, "Rumsfeld: No World War III in Iraq," CNN.com archives, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/11/15/rumsfeld.iraq/index.html>. [accessed February 20, 2010]. Donald Rumsfeld, in a November, 2002 interview with Infinity Broadcasting stated, "I can't tell you if the use of force in Iraq today will last five days, five weeks or five months, but it won't last any longer than that". Later, in hindsight, statements such as this were used by the administration to demonstrate their understanding of Clausewitzian friction.

<sup>5</sup> CNN, "Transcript of President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress, 20 Sep 2001," CNN Website, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/> [accessed March 1, 2010]. President George W. Bush first used the term "Global War on Terror" on September 20, 2001, during a televised

articulate a state of war exists between the United States and those individuals, organizations, and states that sponsor and utilize the tactic of terrorism as a means to achieve their political goals. The criticism of the term GWOT is that the United States declared war on a tactic, something analogous to the United States declaring a “War on Blitzkrieg” in 1941, instead of declaring war on Germany. As this study will demonstrate, war has a meaning, and requires certain prerequisites. However, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was crafted to avoid a declaration of war on Iraq. Instead the United States Government advanced a “War against the Iraqi Baath Regime,” while constantly reinforcing the premise that the Iraqi people were not the enemy, but in fact, friends.<sup>6</sup> Although potentially useful in terms of a propaganda strategy, the effects of this decision, when applied to a coherent military strategy, are potentially troublesome. While attempting to deny a state of war existed between the people of the United States and the people of Iraq, America was busy announcing a declaration of war on many other things, terrorism, drugs, obesity, health care, and the list goes on. It is not surprising that the word has become hopelessly confused.

New terms such as the “Long War” and “Overseas Contingency Operations” have recently surfaced as updated explanations for ongoing efforts.<sup>7</sup> These new terms failed to shift

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address to a joint session of congress. President George W. Bush launched the war on terror when he said, “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.” This was the not the first use of the term “war on terror”, as it was used by European governments to describe efforts to combat the rise of anarchists in the late Nineteenth Century.

<sup>6</sup> ABC News, “Bush Transcript: Case for Action: Transcript of President Bush’s Speech on Iraq,” 7 Oct 2002. ABC Website, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=91159&page=1> [accessed Feb 20, 2010]. President Bush in an October 2002 speech stated, “America is a friend to the people of Iraq,” he said. “Our demands are directed only at the regime that enslaves them and threatens us. When these demands are met, the first and greatest benefit will come to Iraqi men, women and children.”

<sup>7</sup> The term “Long War” was first used by James Carafano of the Heritage Foundation who published a short article titled *The Long War Against Terrorism* in September of 2003. In his 2006 State of the Union address, President Bush used the term “long war” for the first time. See James Carafano, “The Long War Against Terrorism,” (Heritage Foundation, 2003). Available at the Heritage Website, <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed090803a.cfm> [accessed on February 1, 2010]. In March



beliefs, especially within the military establishment, that the United States is fighting war. But at every turn there is another critique of America's ability to fight this war. Yet, another argument for the changing vernacular is that senior leaders, who are so concerned with turning war into something that is politically palatable, simply change its name to mask its identity. If in fact the United States is incapable of coming to terms with what war really is, merely changing its name is likely to have an unhelpful effect.

The term counterinsurgency is the accepted name within the United States Military to describe the campaigns currently conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the primary focal point of military efforts, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan are simultaneously referred to as wars and counterinsurgencies at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of command. Today, leaders refer to enemies as insurgents, terrorists, criminals, or extremists. Some see the interchangeable use of these words as simply innocent jargon. Others see a dangerous trend of wordsmithing in a purely political framework; in this case, turning the enemy into who we want them to be, not who they are. Once again, the effect of failing to properly identify and categorize an enemy or defining an undertaking is a dangerous precedent. Among other difficulties, carelessly applying what appears as interchangeable terms such as war and counterinsurgency or insurgent and terrorist, leads to a potentially dangerous trend of employing incorrect theory, doctrine, and strategy to a particular problem. Persistent ambiguity in defining enemies has further weakened American capability to wage decisive war. As questioned earlier, what is grounding all of this momentum to change the American way of war? Is an extremist an enemy?

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2009, the Obama administration requested that Pentagon staff members avoid use of the term, "Global War on Terror", instead using "Overseas Contingency Operation". In March 2009 the Defense Department officially changed the name of operations from "Global War on Terror" to "Overseas Contingency Operation". President Obama has, however, declared the United States is at war, most notably in his inaugural address on January 20, 2009, the President stated "Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred."

Is counterinsurgency war? What other undertakings are wars? Where is the line between war, and as Clausewitz stated, “Something that is alien to its nature?”<sup>8</sup>

## Purpose

Attempting to identify an accurate definition of war, and if the United States is drifting too far from an appropriate definition of war, is the purpose of this paper.

National leaders, when debating decisions on war, are always constrained by factors unassociated with war itself. Because there is no requirement for our national leaders to possess even rudimentary knowledge of strategic or war theory, they often possess no real understanding of the subject. While many mid and senior level officers are very well educated in the nature of civil-military relations, many elected and appointed officials fail to understand the subject matter. In lieu of providing direct guidance themselves, elected officials naturally look to the military for not only leadership, but for coherence in executing wars. Since the purpose of the U.S. Military is to “fight and win our nations wars,” it is imperative that everyone concerned understand and accept a definition of war.<sup>9</sup> As many leaders are looking for easy solutions, the role of the military community must therefore be one of simultaneous leader education, problem framing, solution development, and mission accomplishment.

Chapter one of Joint Publication 1 (JP-1), *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, begins with a definition of warfare practically written by Carl von Clausewitz himself.<sup>10</sup> In the paragraph long definition, Clausewitz is not only directly quoted, but all three of his best

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<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 88. Clausewitz articulates in Book 1 of *On War* a belief that political leaders often fundamentally mishandle war. As this paper will demonstrate, war is an unpredictable undertaking, attempting to control it is the height of folly and a recipe for disaster.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1 (JP-1), Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 14 May 2007), I-10.

<sup>10</sup> *JP-1*, 2007, I-1.

known axioms are referenced; war as an extension of politics, the trinity of forces, and the fog of war. It is arguable that instead of attempting to define war, the authors of *JP-1* could better serve the reader by simply stating “See Clausewitz, *On War*.” Unfortunately, *JP-1* incorporates additional sentences that directly conflict with Clausewitz’s theory. Yet, if Clausewitz is so quickly deferred to in the capstone military document, what impact does this definition of war have on military strategy and decision-making? What evidence exists that Clausewitzian theory provides coherence to a shifting American way of war? This study looks at the historical emergence of Clausewitz in American military theory that led to his definition prominently used in the capstone military doctrinal document. Analysis centers on the Clausewitzian maxims expressed in *JP-1* in order to glean some eternal understandings of war and attempts to identify points of contention or outright failure to apply those understandings today.

As this study will demonstrate, the United States is breaking the link between its view of the changing nature of 21<sup>st</sup> Century warfare, and the truths explained by Clausewitz. In the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States dangerously altered its capability to fight effective and decisive war because it has failed to properly define war. Clausewitz articulated, above all, a comprehensive definition of war. He theorized that war is as a violent clash between two or more identifiable social groups for the purpose of policy, marked by the emergence of fog, friction, and genius. This definition is grounded in several eternal realities that are almost universally accepted today because they were established in the multi-disciplined Kantian-based philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

A failure to properly apply Clausewitzian theory across the spectrum of strategic and operational thought to underpin a coherent and disciplined military strategy is at the heart of the

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<sup>11</sup> Antulio Echevarria II, *Clausewitz & Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

problem. A few Clausewitzian quotes attached to opinion driven agendas are not good enough.<sup>12</sup> National leaders, both civilian and military, attempt to compensate for perceived weaknesses in the American way of war in a haphazardly reactive manner. A new approach is required today that focuses not on an American way of war, but on an American understanding of war. During war, the strengths of America must be properly and decisively employed if we are to defeat current threats and truly deter those in the future. As Clausewitz stated, “We must render the enemy powerless, and that, in theory, is the true aim of warfare.”<sup>13</sup> Although the United States has the capability to do so, in the current environment, the U.S. is not rendering their enemies powerless. Instead, America is attempting to fight a war with self-imposed limitations and unproven rhetoric, making victory nearly impossible, and surely hollow.

That there is a rapidly growing interest in, and writing on, Clausewitz is undeniable. The quickly expanding number of opinion pieces, articles, reviews, journals, and books run the gamut from purely amateur opinion to masterfully researched academic treatises. There are so many references to Clausewitz across the spectrum of military writing that it is a very crowded, convoluted, and confusing field of study. This monograph adds to the growing discourse not to question the quality of previous work, but in an attempt to educate through context the mid-level Army officer interested in simple, but often unanswered questions. First, beyond the rhetoric, why turn to Clausewitz, and what is war according to Clausewitz? Second, the purpose of this monograph is to explain through metaphorical analysis and case study how mid and senior level military officers can better articulate a need for a proper understanding of war, and the role of a definition in the development of strategy in an ambiguous 21<sup>st</sup> Century environment.

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<sup>12</sup> William F. Owen, “Essay: The War of New Words, Why Military History Trumps Buzzwords,” *Armed Forces Journal*, November 2009, <http://www.afji.com/2009/4114043> [Accessed March 12, 2010].

<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

As stated, Clausewitz and his writings are well documented and many articulate authors capture significant portions of the arguments mentioned above. Two recent eras, one after Vietnam, and one since 2001 have brought on important interest in Clausewitz. Several recent authors contribute substantially to the study of this subject, most notably Antulio Echevarria with his 2007 work *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, Hew Strachan's 2007 *Clausewitz's On War, A Biography* and Jon Sumida's 2008 *Decoding Clausewitz, A New Approach to On War*.<sup>14</sup> These works do justice in their attempt to place Clausewitz in a modern context. Stephen Melton in his 2009, *The Clausewitz Delusion* and Kenneth Campbell's 2007, *A Tale of Two Quagmires* explores the role of the rise of Clausewitz after the Vietnam War and during the GWOT conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Martin Shaw in his 2005 work *The New Western Way of War* touches on what is perceived to be a current Western crisis in military thought and capability, with attention paid to the role of Clausewitz in the changing nature of war. Raymond Aron's, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War*, published in 1985 is a source of the philosophical underpinnings of *On War*, including a comprehensive explanation of the Clausewitzian dialectic and theoretical scheme. Further writings by John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, Martin Van Creveld's, *The Art of War* and *The Transformation of War*, Michael Howard's, *Clausewitz*, Azar Gat's *The Origins of Military Thought From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz*, are excellent sources for placing Clausewitz in historical context. Finally, Christopher Bassford's 1994, *Clausewitz in English*, is the best source for understanding the rise of Clausewitz in the English speaking World.

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<sup>14</sup> Echevarria, Strachan, and Sumida are highly regarded for their successful attempts at contextualizing the modern misuse of Clausewitz. Neither attempts listed above are particularly easy to read, but both are immensely beneficial to the student desiring a scholarly "peel back" of the common rhetorical use of Clausewitz today.

<sup>15</sup> Both Melton and Campbell provide a useful lens for observing modern American conflict and the various strategies, concepts, and failures at work. Although Clausewitz features much more prominently in Melton's work, both provide useful context for exploring the role of theory in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

Many, if not all of the above works would not have been possible without the 1976 translation of Clausewitz's *On War* provided by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Not only has this translation finally made Clausewitz reasonably accessible, the commentary by Howard, Paret, and Bernard Brodie is an essential companion to his writings. That over one thousand copies exist at the library of the Command and General Staff College is testament to its continued standing.

The common thread throughout the above writings is the focus on theoretical, philosophical, and historical perspectives. Fewer authors have ventured into the useful application of Clausewitzian theory by way of providing a comprehensive and comprehensible definition of war. This is problematic when attempting to apply Clausewitz to the modern American way of conducting war. Simple is good, but Clausewitz is anything but simple nor is most of the recent scholarship. If Clausewitz is not accessible, his relevance will surely decline. To better focus the reader, the point of view of this study focuses squarely on the strategic level of war.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in order to remain narrow in scope, the modern doctrine referenced throughout is limited to the contents of three well-known manuals, JP-1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (2007), U.S. Army FM 3-0 *Operations* (2008), and U.S. Army FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (2006).

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<sup>16</sup> For definitions of levels of command, useful explanations are provided by Stephen L. Melton in *The Clausewitz Delusion*, (MN: Minneapolis, Zenith Press, 2009), p. IX. He refers to strategic as "the decisions made in Washington D.C., by the President, the Congress, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Strategic decisions include whether to go to war or make other military commitments." According to FM 3-0, the strategic level of war "is the level at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) strategic security objectives and guidance, and develops and uses national resources to achieve those objectives." See Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0, Operations*, (Washington DC: GPO. 27 February 2008), 2-2.

## The Rise of Clausewitz in America, 1832-2009

It was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general summary to the introduction of Clausewitzian theory in the United States military and place his current renaissance in historical perspective. The rise of Clausewitz as the prominent military theorist in America was not a gradual process beginning with the publication of *On War* in 1832 and progressing steadily through time to the present. In contrast, Clausewitz's influence has become a recurring affair, normally peaking after a crisis or during a period of internal reinvention.<sup>18</sup> The most recent iteration of the Clausewitz cycle occurred during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century resulting from both the crisis of potential failure in Iraq and Afghanistan and the revolution of military affairs brought on by an internal transformation.

### The Early Years, 1832-1945

Although suggested at times that President Abraham Lincoln was introduced to Clausewitz by way of his German-speaking personal assistant, John Hay, there is little doubt that the theories of Jomini, combined with a West Point engineering tradition, dominated American military thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>19</sup> Translations of Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War* available to Civil War leaders did reference the work of Clausewitz; however, most references

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<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 60.

<sup>19</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 51-55.

were either critical or disdainful.<sup>20</sup> Only General Henry Wagner Halleck, known as the preeminent military scholar during the Civil War, is directly linked to Clausewitz in the Civil War era, due to his referencing the Prussian in his pre-war writings.<sup>21</sup> Overall, however, any effort to glean direct Clausewitzian influence from the actions of the senior leaders on either side during the Civil War has not been successful. The vast quantity of Civil War information available today includes many conjectural references to Clausewitz's influence, most however fall into the "what-if" category of historical literature.

With the first English translation of *On War* not available until 1873, the little known Prussian's influence was a gradual and contradictory affair. Generally, it appears the impact of Clausewitz on American military thought was only secondary, through the writings of Liddell Hart, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Julian Stafford Corbett.<sup>22</sup> Thoughtful officers, introduced to European scholarship as American involvement in the world provided opportunity for travel and education, brought some Clausewitzian influence back to America. Early Twentieth-Century journal articles and publications by the likes of Colonel Arthur Wagner in the years leading up to World War I demonstrate a use of Clausewitz that clearly assumes his theories were generally known among the intended audience.<sup>23</sup> This counters the argument Christopher Bassford formulates in his historical analysis of Clausewitz's use in America prior to the inter-war

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<sup>20</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 50. General Halleck, known as "Old Brains," was the General-in-Chief of all U.S. Armies and later Chief of Staff of the United States Army throughout the entirety of the Civil War.

<sup>21</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur L. Wagner, *Strategy*. (Kansas: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing, 1904). This fascinating transcript of a lecture given by COL Wagner to several groups of Army officers during 1903 maneuvers reveal a deep understanding of Clausewitzian theory and his direct references to the Prussian demonstrate that at a minimum, COL Wagner believed his audience was aware of *On War*'s existence.



period.<sup>24</sup> Although *On War* percolated within academic circles, its status was a subject of some dispute, especially when confronted with American experience in the Philippines and Latin America, the slaughter of World War I, and rapid technological advancements such as air power.

Clausewitz's first systematic introduction to the US Army officer corps occurred during the interwar years, as his writings became more available at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and the U.S. Army War College. This introduction was primarily through the often distorted and conflicted writings of J.F.C. Fuller and B.H. Liddell Hart, and further confused due to the difficulties faced by military leaders when attempting to understand the rapid changes in the technological potential of weapons and their possible employment in war. Although the Prussian was briefly introduced to students at both CGSC and the Army War College, there is no evidence that his writings were incorporated into anything other than a short, unincorporated discussion. A sustained interest in German military structure and successes remained the primary driver for interest in Clausewitz from the end of the First World War until well after the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Middle Ages, 1945-1976**

At CGSC, officers are what they read. One can trace the rise of, and interest in Clausewitz at CGSC by the number of copies of *On War* on the shelves of the school's library, from four in 1911, to six in 1950, eight in 1976, one hundred and ninety in 1984, to well over one

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<sup>24</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 152-3. Bassford argues Clausewitz was known, but not ingested, by the U.S. Military. This is probably true, but his argument fails to prove the level of "ingestion" was less in 1910 than any other era.

<sup>25</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 68. Bassford argues that an American interest in Clausewitz was secondary to an interest in the "German military model." He goes on to argue in Chapters 14 and 18 that American interest in German militarism occasionally allowed for a superficial introduction to Clausewitz by way of historically, not philosophically inclined Soldiers.

thousand in 2007.<sup>26</sup> The 1976 translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret is almost singularly responsible, as this version is widely regarded as the consummate English translation, making Clausewitz much more comprehensible to the average English-speaking reader.<sup>27</sup> But even with so many copies on hand, and some long standing efforts to introduce Clausewitz to the officer corps at CGSC, most Army officers graduate today with only a very brief and dangerously superficial introduction to the theories of Clausewitz. Even with as many copies of *On War* as students at CGSC, and with a student body perfectly positioned in their career progression to appreciate Clausewitz, the reading and understanding of *On War* remains, ultimately, an individual responsibility.

With Clausewitz so widely regarded today, and so quickly quoted in doctrine and military academic circles, why were his writings so peripheral and unincorporated a mere forty years ago? What occurred that made America repudiate its own historical military underpinnings and uniquely independent theoretical perspectives? Why unquestioningly turn to a Prussian whose writings were completely intertwined in eighteenth century European-Napoleonic power politics?

The answer begins with the crisis of the Vietnam War. America entered the 1960s facing the very real potential for a global, ideological war considered, conceptually, an extension of World War II. The American military believed that if war arrived, the government, supported by a willing populace, would unleash the military and provide all elements of national power, especially industrial might, to defeat the Soviet threat and remake the World order. The victories of World War II, and the subsequent narration of those victories, created a thoroughly unrealistic expectation of democratic politics surrendering power for a “greater” purpose. The well-publicized chink in this belief, the rift between President Harry S. Truman and General Douglas

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<sup>26</sup> Melton, *The Clausewitz Delusion*, 15-16.

<sup>27</sup> Hew Strachan. *Clausewitz's On War, A Biography*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), ix.

MacArthur during the Korean Conflict was improperly diagnosed and poorly internalized by a military completely focused on defeating Soviet Forces in a general war. The firing of General MacArthur was not simply an issue of military versus political control of war, as many suggest, but also an illustration of the nature of war. The situation exemplified a concept identified by Clausewitz that friction prevents wars from moving to a naturally rational absolute.<sup>28</sup>

The next conflict, Vietnam, was a systemic shock to a military that truly believed that future war would be a repeat of the World War II model. Throughout the tumultuous 1960's and into the early 1970's, many in the American military questioned this belief and a desire emerged to comprehend the true nature of war. The desire to understand war became such an institutional prerogative in the US Army that the lessons of the past were dismissed in an effort to prepare for the future. Clausewitz's *On War*, with its early definition of war as a continuation of politics, was ready-made for those deeply perplexed officers and academics attempting to place the Vietnam crisis into a larger context. There was, however, a generation of officers who emerged from their Vietnam experience with a strong desire to better understand war. These officers became the power behind the fundamental reshaping of the U.S. military beginning in the mid 1970s.

The American Army that emerged from the Vietnam War was an army without direction, struggling to regain purpose. The war disillusioned many and confused others. Some of the many serious problems facing the post-Vietnam Army included a depleted and poorly trained non-commissioned officer corps, rampant drug use, apathetic conscripts, poorly maintained equipment, a government unable to expend the political capital to reform the military after the difficulties of the Vietnam War, and a population that bordered on openly hostile.<sup>29</sup> The structure and organization of the army was out of balance with the still very real threat from Soviet and

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<sup>28</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 77-78, 80-81, 86-89.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth J. Campbell, *A Tale of Two Quagmires: Iraq, Vietnam and the Hard Lessons of War* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 48-71.

Eastern-Bloc armies poised just across a contentious European border. Far-sighted and innovative officers such as General William E. DePuy voiced open concern about a broken Army and a real need for reform. These introspective officers were caught in the difficult position of simultaneously attempting to understand the experiences of the Vietnam War while looking for solutions to emerging and evolving problems. With little direction and a need to reestablish a solid foundation that the Army could use as a steppingstone to recovery and growth, new solutions emerged.<sup>30</sup> Carl von Clausewitz and his theories made an appearance at this time. His entrance into the Army's schooling took root as forward thinking leaders began the process of re-establishing the foundation needed to rebuild a broken Army.

## **The Enlightenment, 1976-2009**

The 1976 translation of *On War* by Howard and Paret could not have been timelier for the United States Army. *On War's* growing influence demonstrated most clearly by the 1981 publication of *On Strategy, The Vietnam War in Context* by Harry Summers.<sup>31</sup> This scholarly review of the disconnect between the tactics employed by the US Army and the national strategy was so heavily underpinned by Clausewitzian theory that he is directly referenced or quoted sixty-nine times. His reference to the 1976 translation of *On War* is an early recognition of what is widely accepted today, that Howard and Paret made Clausewitz much more available to the American Army.<sup>32</sup> In the introduction to *On Strategy*, COL Summers provides an excellent

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Lock-Pullan, "How to Rethink War: Conceptual Innovation and AirLand Battle Doctrine," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (August 2005):680-2.

<sup>31</sup> Harry Summers, *On Strategy, the Vietnam War in Context* (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 130.

assessment for his use of *On War* and the relevance of Clausewitz for conducting his assessment of the Vietnam War.<sup>33</sup>

The creation of the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in 1973 gave the Army an avenue for the direct injection of Clausewitz's theories in American doctrine. The first two major products of TRADOC, 1976's Active Defense Doctrine and 1982's AirLand Battle Doctrine represented a rapidly emerging effort for developing a new paradigm in the Army by way of formalizing an operational level of war, and introducing operational art into the Army's educational system.<sup>34</sup> Especially regarding a reliance on the principles of war, early doctrinal reform focused on the theories of Jomini. An increasing interest in the philosophy of Clausewitz with the concept of center of gravity and decisive points grew from an initial commentary in the 1982 version of FM 100-5, *Operations*.<sup>35</sup> The 2008 version of FM 3-0, *Operations*, relegated the principles of war to an appendix, supplanted by an entire chapter devoted to Operational Art.<sup>36</sup> This chapter not only began with a direct quotation from Clausewitz, one of five quotations from the Prussian Philosopher found in the manual, but the entire chapter predicates upon the Clausewitzian concepts of end state, centers of gravity, and decisive points.<sup>37</sup>

Parallel to the creation of TRADOC, another phenomenon that emerged during the Cold War was an increasing historical and practical interest in the German way of war. Study of the German operational art combined with a layman interest in the success of the German blitzkrieg

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<sup>33</sup> Summers, *On Strategy*, 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare*, ( Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 256-261.

<sup>35</sup> Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 3-0, Operations* (Washington D.C.: GPO, February 2008), Chapter 6. The purpose of the chapter on operational art is to move the Army planner away from prescriptive lists associated with the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) to a deeper understanding of the operational problem. Chapter 6 relies on Clausewitzian theories for validation, but at no place throughout the entire manual do the authors make an effort to provide a useful definition of war itself.

<sup>37</sup> *FM 3-0*, Chapter 6.

and the victories of 1866-1870, led some within the military's intellectual community to explore the role of Clausewitz in German successes.<sup>38</sup> The result was a general acknowledgement of the preeminence of Clausewitz's *On War* in the 1980s.

The Persian Gulf War in 1991 provided a great validation, of not only the efforts to rebuild the Army after Vietnam, but the updated doctrine that paralleled the rebuilding process. Early euphoria over the rapid tactical and operational dominance displayed in the short war, however, gave way to a more serious critique of the war by assessing the on-going difficulties in containing a belligerent Saddam Hussein. The argument generally centered on the difference between operational success and strategic victory. The theory of Clausewitz was a perfect fit for describing this difference.

The next phase of Clausewitzian influence surfaced with the uncertainty over the information age and transformation emerging in the last few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The shift from AirLand Battle Doctrine to Full-Spectrum Operations, combined with a self-imposed revolution in military affairs, associated with network-centric warfare resulted in an explosion of both academic and opinion articles on the new direction undertaken by the Army and Defense Department. Applying Clausewitz to underpin the arguments of so many authors either for or against change was a constantly perplexing use and misuse of his philosophy. Regardless, his renaissance was undeniable.

The Global War on Terror represents the latest chapter in the rise of Clausewitz. His philosophy, already a popular buttress to many arguments over the direction of Army transformation, was easily transferred to critique of on-going combat operations. As more commentary developed as an inevitable result of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the

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<sup>38</sup> Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm, The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004). Memoirs of German generals such as Erich von Manstein, Heinz Guderian, Friedrich von Mellenthin, and Albert Kesselring continue to line the bookshelves of amateur historians and American bookstores today.

constant use and misuse of Clausewitz solidified his position as America's answer to questions of war.

## The American Debate Over War & Clausewitz

Theory should be study, not doctrine.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.<sup>39</sup>

Clausewitz's reputation today results from his historical rise in America over the past 180 years and the nature of American society, past and present. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the use and misuse of Clausewitz, and how misrepresentation of Clausewitz by way of gross generalizations, over-simplifications, and just plain empty rhetoric clouds *On War*'s ability to provide coherence.

### Clausewitz on Doctrine

Prior to analyzing the reason why Clausewitz is applied to define war in modern American doctrine, it is important to establish what Clausewitz thought of doctrine. In Chapter 2 of Book 2 of *On War*, Clausewitz attempts to clarify the proper use of theory in relation to doctrine.<sup>40</sup> Clausewitz uses two approaches. First, he highlights the purpose of doctrine at the various levels of war. Clausewitz states, "In brief, *tactics* will present far fewer difficulties to the theorist than will *strategy*."<sup>41</sup> He argues that at the tactical level, more need for physical activity than intellectual thought exists. This argument stresses the need for a doctrine to streamline and regularize that physical activity to gain efficiency. At the higher level, operational and strategic,

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<sup>39</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141, Author's Emphasis.

Clausewitz argues that “The higher the rank, the more the problems multiply, reaching their highest point in the supreme commander. At this level, almost all solutions must be left to the imaginative intellect.”<sup>42</sup> This argument stresses the danger for establishing a doctrine for what is essentially an intellectual process such as developing a campaign plan.

Second, Clausewitz makes an argument that the proper place for theory is study, not doctrine. Clausewitz starts by stating, “Whenever an activity deals primarily with the same things again and again – with the same ends and the same means, even though there may be minor variations and an infinite diversity of combinations – these things are susceptible to rational study.”<sup>43</sup> In essence, Clausewitz argues that rational study is simply experience and pragmatism and that pure theory is unnecessary. Rationality and pragmatism should dominate doctrine, and when combined with his first argument, doctrine is best left to the tactical level of war. Theory, Clausewitz argues, “is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him on the battlefield.”<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz uses the term “frame of reference” to better articulate the role of theory as an intellectual and educational tool.<sup>45</sup> Clausewitz argues for the thorough schooling of commanders and a resistance to the temptation to turn theory into a doctrinal plan of action. By stating, “(n)ot to accompany him on the battlefield,” Clausewitz reinforces his view that doctrine and theory are separate and distinct products for the operational or strategic commander. This argument further reinforces other portions of *On War* including the role of the genius and the existence of friction.

Placed in the context of US doctrine, Clausewitz would almost certainly be thrilled with his influence on the American definition of war at the beginning of *JP-1*, and subsequently more

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<sup>42</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

<sup>45</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.



concerned with each additional reference to his theory as US manuals became less theoretical and increasingly doctrinal.

## **The Purpose of Doctrine in the United States Army.**

While Clausewitz defined doctrine as simply “a manual for action,” it is necessary to understand what the modern American definition consists of, not only technically, but also metaphysically, in the minds of the Soldiers tasked to carry out that doctrine.<sup>46</sup>

Webster’s defines doctrine as either “a principle or position or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief” or “a principle of law established through past decisions.”<sup>47</sup> *JP-1* defines doctrine as “a common perspective from which to plan, train, and conduct military operations. It represents what is taught, believed, and advocated as what is right.”<sup>48</sup> *JP-1* goes on to state in Appendix A, “doctrine is authoritative guidance and will be followed except when, in the judgment of the commander, exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise.”<sup>49</sup> Also in Appendix A, *JP-1* states that “doctrine is not dogmatic – the focus is on how to think about operations, not what to think about operations. Its purpose is to aid thinking not to replace it.” This last statement clearly meets Clausewitz’s definition of theory.

The statement “how to think about operations” elicits a comparison to Clausewitz’s statement on “frame of reference.” After such comparison, it becomes apparent that the *JP-1*

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<sup>46</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doctrine>. Accessed on 2 Feb 2010.

<sup>48</sup> *JP-1*, IX.

<sup>49</sup> *JP-1*, A-1.

definition of doctrine is a combination of Clausewitz's understanding of both doctrine and theory.<sup>50</sup>

However, far from adhering to a formal definition of doctrine, American Soldiers today tend to believe doctrine is a "start point," or a "general guide" for action.<sup>51</sup> This mentality lends itself to doctrine considered more than a rigid "manual of action," but as a theoretical guide, as if reading the 2006 edition of FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* is the same as reading *On War* or Mao Tse Tung's *On Guerilla Warfare*. This is not to say that all doctrine is equally theoretical. Strategic and operational level doctrine is more theoretical in construct. One would be hard pressed to find any theory in FM 3-21.8 *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*. However, even the FM 3-21.8 definition of doctrine, although slightly more rigid and practical than the JP-1 version still references the need for judgment.<sup>52</sup> After carefully comparing numerous other US Army field manuals and US Military joint publications, one is more likely to identify with Clausewitz's first definition of, and purpose for, doctrine. As he claims, it is very focused and authoritative for the Soldier at the tactical level, but increasingly theoretical for the commander and his staff as they move up through the operational and strategic levels of command. This raises the question as to why the Army fails to explain this doctrinal to theoretical progression to Soldiers as they move through the various levels of command.

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<sup>50</sup> This blurring of the line between theory and doctrine is problematic for the US military. Although Clausewitz believed theory should be a separate study by the practitioner of war prior to war, the American military incorporates theory throughout its doctrine, often clearly incorporating purely theoretical concepts into doctrinal rules.

<sup>51</sup> A recent discussion among CGSC students in reference the purpose of doctrine included statements such as "doctrine is a good place for getting some ideas," "doctrine is a start point only," and "doctrine isn't supposed to tell you how to do things." At no point did any student argue that doctrine is authoritative.

<sup>52</sup> Department of the Army, FM 3-21.8, *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, (Washington DC: GPO, 28 March 2007), 1-7.

## Clausewitz as Doctrinal Reinforcement

As mentioned, *JP-1* immediately defers to Clausewitz on the very first page when attempting to provide a definition of war.<sup>53</sup> As stated by Dr. William Gregor, “The newly published Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States finds it necessary to cite Clausewitz on page I-1, as if invoking Clausewitz will imbue the guidance with wisdom.”<sup>54</sup> The latest version of *FM 3-0* adds four direct quotations from *On War*. The placement of the quotations are far from random, they are strategically located where a line from a “dead German” provides needed legitimacy to otherwise new or controversial doctrine.<sup>55</sup>

What sets Carl von Clausewitz apart from every other military theorist is his unique place in the military culture. In this increasingly small, educated, and specialized subculture of the Western World, Clausewitz represents the most tangible example of intellectual genius. He represents exceptional philosophy, in the finest traditions of early 19th century German Enlightenment. It is not surprising that Clausewitz is conjured whenever necessary to reinforce doctrine; however, this is also the genesis of the dangerous precedence of using him as a superficial crutch.<sup>56</sup> Much of *On War* is a dissection of the topic using the Kantian system of logic.<sup>57</sup> Due to this logic, simply opening *On War* and finding a useable quotation to reinforce a position is inherently dangerous. But it is extraordinarily common. The mere presence of

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<sup>53</sup> *JP-1*, I-1.

<sup>54</sup> William J. Gregor, “War Termination in the Age of Terror,” (paper presented at the biannual conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, Chicago, IL, October 27, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> The U.S. Military’s fascination with the German way of war has reached a point where the term “dead German” is immediately recognized as a reference to any one of a number of obviously superior intellectual giants, normally possessing the preposition ‘von’ in their name, whose mere mentioning makes all further debate merely academic.

<sup>56</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy*, ed. by Michael Handel. (New Jersey: Frank Cass & Co., 1986), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Echevarria, *Clausewitz & Contemporary War*, 3.

Clausewitz in a reinforcing role can lead someone with more than a superficial understanding of Clausewitz's methodology to question the entire foundation of an argument.

## **The Military Pundit, the Historian, and the Battle over Clausewitz**

Exploring the role of the military historian and the media pundit in the recent rise of Clausewitz before further discussing his influence on American warfare is necessary. An increasing use of Clausewitzian theory in scholarly and opinion articles since the early 1980s created a growing community of self-described Clausewitzian scholars – individuals whose writings attempted to explain the true meaning behind *On War* or otherwise place *On War* in a modern context useful to the practitioner. This phenomenon created a self-perpetuating cottage industry of increasingly narrowly focused and overlapping academic and critical writings. Recent works by Echevarria, Strachan, and Sumida complementing earlier works by Aron, Brodie, Bassford, Howard, and Paret are all exceptionally scholarly and well received, but at times, also nearly as incomprehensible as the original writings of Clausewitz himself. Dr. Thomas Bruscino's recent review of Echevarria's *Clausewitz & Contemporary War* accentuates this point when he stated, "Perhaps the best that can be said for Echevarria's book is that it is not easy."<sup>58</sup> Bruscino goes on to aptly sum up the on-going struggle between Clausewitz's disciples by maintaining that "We must continue to do the hard work of struggling with Clausewitz and his interpreters because after all these years, war is simple, but the simplest thing is still difficult."

To the average reader, a proper introduction to Clausewitz is essential; in most cases, it is also not available. Howard and Paret, in their translation, provide three introductory essays, two of their own, and a third by Bernard Brodie. This is combined with an afterward by Bernard Brodie titled "A Guide to the Reading of *On War*." This seventy-page guide is arguably the best

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Bruscino, review of *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* by Antulio Echevarria II, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (January 2010).

way to introduce students to *On War*, but its location at the end of the hefty volume does nothing to add to its stand-alone clarity. However, with Brodie's introductory efforts under increased scrutiny as well, readers are left to ponder if modern Clausewitzian scholars are attempting to recreate, in a most mischievous way, the Clausewitz-Jomini dispute of the 1830s.<sup>59</sup> The immediate result of this intellectual quarrel is a large population of Army officers left with either a frustrated disdain for Clausewitz, or an equal disparagement for the scholars whose ambiguity in explaining Clausewitz is equally distasteful.

The military pundit, a collection of varied individuals often found writing books and opinion pieces, reporting in the media, or offering journal articles to any number of policy and military related publications, are frequently accused by the core Clausewitzian scholars for gross misuse of Clausewitz and *On War*. It is a common occurrence for these scholars to lie in ambush for the unsuspecting pundit and attack their writings with a scathing and continuous barrage of criticism. The historian John Keegan received just such a volley after the publication of 1994's *A History of Warfare*. Among the ambushers was Christopher Bassford who wrote, "Nothing anywhere in Keegan's work—despite his many diatribes about Clausewitz and 'the Clausewitzians'—reflects any reading whatsoever of Clausewitz's own writings."<sup>60</sup> Perusing the web pages of Clausewitz.com finds numerous other statements such as "...the sheer ignorance of pop-historians like John Keegan. (Keegan demonstrably knows nothing about Clausewitz, and has never read any of his writings, but he has become widely accepted as a major commentator nonetheless.)"<sup>61</sup> The accusations by Clausewitzian scholars of misuse of Clausewitz has become

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<sup>59</sup> Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 1..

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz," *War and History*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (November 1996).

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.clausewitz.com/FAQs.htm#Why2>

such a common occurrence that almost all of their writings about Clausewitz includes either an opening phrase to that end, or an entire paper devoted to uncovering that grave abuse.

Another problem facing students at the Army's Command and General Staff College, and almost certainly elsewhere, is a tendency among the faculty with a knowledge of Clausewitz to quickly "turn off the Clausewitz light" to students with questions about *On War*. This is accomplished by spinning a question a student presents about a particular passage in *On War* into a generally incomprehensible dialogue about the nature of 18<sup>th</sup> Century German Philosophy, the Clausewitz dialectic, or any other number of overly intellectual points on what *On War* is and is not. The result is a sense among many students that Clausewitz is too intellectual for them to understand, best left for the experts to tell them what they need to know. This raises important questions for discussion in the next chapters. If *On War* is so difficult to grasp, so easily misunderstood, and so often misused, is it appropriate to inject Clausewitzian theory into US Doctrine? Will his introduction make our doctrine equally confusing? Will it require a generation of über-intellectual officers more cerebral than a career academic such as John Keegan?

## **Applying Clausewitz to Everything**

Clausewitz wrote *On War* about war, yet today a fashionable trend of applying Clausewitzian theory to all human endeavors further muddles an already bewildering landscape. Books applying military principles to education, business, human relations, political science, psychology, coaching, and self-improvement are often popular additions to bookstores and must read lists.<sup>62</sup> That some of these books include detailed lists for success and grossly amateur military principles, and are actually anti- Clausewitzian, remains an apparent unknown or equally

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<sup>62</sup> Moises Naim, "Mixed Metaphors: Why the wars on poverty, drugs, terror, drunk driving, teen pregnancy, and other ills can't be won," *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2010): 112.

irrelevant fact to an audience trained to believe the name Clausewitz is the root of all things successful.

As established in later chapters, *On War* requires physical violence between two opponents as a prerequisite for the realization of his theory. According to Echevarria, “if we were to remove fighting or violence from Clausewitz’s system, it would collapse; moreover, his other concepts, such as friction, danger, and uncertainty, would lose their significance.”<sup>63</sup> Without the element of violence, Clausewitz’s theory is invalid, and the concepts of *On War* are nothing more than out of context disparate ideas devoid of meaning.

## **Joint Publication 1 and the Doctrinal Definition of War**

Clear ideas on these matters do, therefore, have some practical value. The human mind, moreover, has a universal thirst for clarity, and longs to feel itself part of an orderly scheme of things.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*<sup>64</sup>

How America defines war appears simple enough, the truth however, is anything but. Most Americans are sure they know what war is, but few are able to provide anything more than a superficial definition. It is dangerous to assume that war is easily definable or a definition is not necessary for expediency’s sake. There is also the problem of overly simplifying and narrowing war by means of a concise definition. Likewise, overly complicating a definition with a comprehensive theory runs the risk of confusing and diluting war into a generally incomprehensible aggregation. However, an argument for the need of a definition of war is that without a definition, it is impossible to ground current actions against a desired outcome. Since

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<sup>63</sup> Echevaaria, *Clausewitz & Contemporary War*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 71.

America is doing something comparable to war today, an assumption is that a definition of war is not only necessary, but also critical to success. In locating an appropriate definition, the start point for the United States is military doctrine.

## War Defined

The first page of *JP-1* provides the following definition of war:

War is socially sanctioned violence to achieve a political purpose. In its essence war is a violent clash of wills. **War is a complex, human undertaking that does not respond to deterministic rules.** Clausewitz described it as “the continuation of politics by other means”. It is characterized by the shifting interplay of a trinity of forces (rational, nonrational, and irrational) connected by principal actors that comprise a social trinity of the people, military forces, and the government. He notes that the conduct of war combines obstacles such as friction, chance, and uncertainty. The cumulative effect of these obstacles is often described as “the fog of war.” These observations remain true today and place a burden on the commander (CDR) to remain responsive, versatile, and adaptive in real time to seize opportunities and reduce vulnerabilities. This is the art of war.<sup>65</sup>

As stated in the introduction, it is evident that the United States Department of Defense has turned to Clausewitz’s *On War* as the theoretical underpinning for a definition of war. This definition appears generally simple; being only one paragraph in length, but a closer look reveals a superficial, even misleading, introduction to several complicated concepts that require further study. Most Soldiers, policy makers, and those interested in the policy process have not read Clausewitz, but to understand the definition of war in *JP-1*, it is necessary to read and understand *On War*. As it is frequently stated, most people only possess a dangerously shallow appreciation of Clausewitzian theory.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *JP-1*, I-1, Author’s Emphasis.

<sup>66</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy*, ed. by Michael Handel. (New Jersey: Frank Cass & Co., 1986), 1.



## Clausewitz's Definition of War

War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale. Countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it as a whole can be formed by imaging a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On*

*War*.<sup>67</sup>

### Clausewitz, War, and Wrestling with the Metaphor

Properly defining war by way of an accurate description was Clausewitz's most important task. Failing to understand and implement that definition makes his entire theory, and Clausewitz himself, irrelevant. Clausewitz's definition of war is the source of some genuine confusion; it is not as easy as simply reading a short paragraph. The purpose of *On War* is to reinforce his definition of war with a comprehensive theory; therefore, the actual definition emerges from several ideas found in Book 1. A popular definition of Clausewitzian war are his axioms about war as a continuation of politics, but that and similar statements only reinforce the purpose of war, not a true definition of war. His statements that "war is a duel on a larger scale, countless duels go to make up war"<sup>68</sup> and "war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will"<sup>69</sup> are simple, yet both worded in such a way as to reinforce his later concepts on *war as politics* and *friction in war*. Clausewitz's several approaches to a definition are keeping with his philosophical method of gaining multiple perspectives. The entirety of *On War* must be considered in order to properly define war. This is difficult for many readers seeking a simple, easily comprehensible definition.

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<sup>67</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

<sup>69</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

An understanding of *On War* illustrates the possibility of gaining a comprehensive definition, but comprehensive equates to complicated, and to the average reader, this is not what they have in mind. There is a crucial need for Americans, faced with difficulty in grasping an explanation for war and easily swayed by unproblematic sound bites, lists, and rhetoric, to remove this clutter. A useful method of for removing an idea into its environment is the use of the metaphor.<sup>70</sup>

On page one of *On War*, Clausewitz states “a picture of (war) can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will. His *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance.”<sup>71</sup> There is potential power in the use of the wrestlers in the ring metaphor. To identify what war is, freeing the concept from present circumstances is critically important. When applied to any particular situation, such as the preparation for the 2003 Iraq War, it is easy to become mired in circumstantial conditions. In American society, there is a prevalence of background noise, competing requirements, political promises, punditry, and other distracters. Identifying what something really means outside of that contextual noise is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, it is also true that the use of metaphors leads to dangerous generalizations, even falsehoods.

In attempting to understand Clausewitz’s definition of war today, it is critical to remove as much background noise as possible. In the case of Clausewitz, it is in the generalizations, not the specifics that make his theory so valid. Applying Clausewitzian theory in the midst of competing and contradictory voices is the source of his misuse today. Clausewitz himself argued

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<sup>70</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press; 1980). According to Lakoff and Johnson, a metaphor is a fundamental mechanism of mind, one that allows us to use what we know about our physical and social experience to provide understanding of countless other subjects.

<sup>71</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

against his theory as anything other than a “frame of reference.”<sup>72</sup> Placing Clausewitz in the context of an abstract metaphor is the best way of providing relevance to his theories, without becoming bogged-down in the intricacies of details that make it so difficult in modern times to put everything in a logical and healthy perspective.

## War as a Wrestling Metaphor

Clausewitz asked his readers to imagine a pair of wrestlers. It is important to put the wrestlers in context by envisioning an arena filled with wrestlers who represent all the nations, states, and potential belligerent peoples in the world. Many wrestlers are defined by generally recognized nation-states and geographic boundaries; they are the ones sitting in their chairs.<sup>73</sup> Only an ideology, a social collectiveness, or circumstance defines other wrestlers, they are the ones standing around or sitting on the floor. All wrestlers, however, are ultimately defined by a potential ability to get inside a wrestling ring. Some wrestlers are much bigger and stronger than others are, some are well funded and well trained; others are weak and all but totally incapable. Some are efficient and educated while others are slovenly brutes. In fact, every combination exists, and has existed since time immemorial. No wrestlers are identical, some are fundamentally different. Some wrestlers are great friends, some mortal enemies. This can change over time. Some join loose coalitions for protection and others take solace in their independence. The demographics change surprisingly fast. Very frequently, a wrestling match is used for chair improvement.

A wrestling match might start outside a ring, but a ring is immediately provided. All the wrestlers in the arena, regardless of participation in the match, have a stake in clearly identifying

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<sup>72</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

<sup>73</sup> A chair is the ultimate goal of any wrestler. Since a wrestler is defined as an identifiable social construct possessing even the rudimentary components of a Clausewitzian trinity, autonomy and self-determination continues to be his compelling incentive for existence.

the size, location, and boundaries of the wrestling ring. Rings are tied to the arena; there has never been a wrestling match outside of the arena. There can be, and usually are, more than one ring at a time, rings pop up and disappear as needed. Throughout the history of the arena, few can remember when a ring was not present. Sometimes rings combine or separate, rings also grow and shrink as needed, just like any operational environment. Wrestlers inside the ring sometimes fight alone, or as part of a tag-team coalition event, and sometimes wrestlers even change sides inside the ring. Occasionally wrestlers fight in two rings at the same time. Although some wrestlers, normally those with significant power, constantly attempt to provide order to the never-ending chaos in and around the ring, in the end there are no real rules. Almost anything can happen in the ring, and the narrative of the arena is dominated with fantastic tales of goings-on inside the ring. Over time some wrestlers disappear, some become stronger while others become weaker. Some important and respected wrestlers enter the ring only to demonstrate they are no longer strong.

The goal for every wrestler entering the ring is either to win the match in order to gain a chair, or improve the one he already has, or to leave the ring without losing, and therefore surrendering or weakening his chair. In order to achieve this, some rely on carefully articulated policy, others brute force, some use both. Some go for an immediate pin; others only attempt to wear out their opponent through a lengthy match. The capability of the wrestler does not always determine his strategy. Anything can happen in the ring and everyone is often surprised.<sup>74</sup> Some

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<sup>74</sup> Clausewitz articulates the notion of friction in war in Chapter 7 of Book 1, of *On War*. Although the flavor of the chapter is intrinsically operational and tactical in nature, additional readings regarding genius, danger, and theory articulate a more nuanced description of friction as more attuned to complexity and unpredictability. Further study on the inherent unpredictability of war leads one to the writings of Thucydides, who in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, described in vibrant detail constant occurrences of unpredictable events. One notable description of unpredictability was Thucydides passage regarding Athens disastrous decision to prolong the war after a small victory over the Spartans at Pylos. Sparta's generous peace offering was rejected by Athens who "grasped at something further". That "something further" turned out to be an eventual defeat. See Robert B. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*, (New York: Free Press, 1996), 234.

wrestlers have bowed out of the ring gracefully after quickly being pinned, but this is actually the exception.<sup>75</sup> Many wrestlers stay in the ring much longer than expected, even if they are repeatedly pinned. Some are nearly killed in the ring, but unexpectedly remain, leading an opponent preparing to leave the ring to remain. Others are killed, but are replaced by another wrestler almost immediately. Although the history of the ring clearly demonstrates it is an unpredictable place where most who enter stay longer than expected, most of the strong wrestlers continue to fool themselves into believing that due to their undeniable power they can control the ring. Most wrestlers do not like the ring much, although this in turn varies. A general trend of trying to get in and out of the ring as quickly as possible exists; however, it is common that getting into the ring leads to problems that force a wrestler to stay in the ring much longer than intended.

Each ring inside the arena represents a complex adaptive system.<sup>76</sup> Although it is possible to measure quantifiable strengths and postulate qualitative desires of an opposing wrestler, the history of the ring demonstrates above all an inability to gain an output commensurate with an input.<sup>77</sup> The physical exhaustion of a wrestler interacts with decision making, fear, and varying levels of commitment while simultaneously grappling with an opponent dealing with the same variables. These variables are what creates complexity and are

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<sup>75</sup> Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199-204.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Axelrod and Michael D. Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity, Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xi, 17. Axelrod and Cohen state, “In complex adaptive systems there are often many participants, perhaps even many kinds of participants. They interact in intricate ways that continually reshape their collective future.” Axelrod and Cohen refer to the existence of emergent properties “which are properties of the system that separate parts do not have.”

<sup>77</sup> Axelrod and Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity*, xi. As stated by Axelrod, “When policy makers hear about complexity research, they often ask ‘How can I control complexity?’ What they usually mean is ‘How can I eliminate it?’ But complexity stems from fundamental causes that cannot always be eliminated

the final pieces of the Clausewitzian definition of war, the friction associated with his “wondrous trinity.”<sup>78</sup>

Clausewitz introduces his wondrous trinity in Chapter 1 of Book 1 of *On War*, writing on the need to appreciate a delicate balance between the people, the military, and the government.<sup>79</sup> On page 1 of *JP-I*, the authors introduce the theory as the “shifting interplay of a trinity of forces (rational, nonrational, and irrational) connected by principle actors that comprise a social trinity of the people, military forces, and the government.”<sup>80</sup>

It is now useful to return to the wrestler metaphor. The wrestlers are not monolithic entities judged solely on their visible and quantifiable military power, although history demonstrates this is often what an opponent considers prior to entering the ring. In actuality, three things characterize the capability of a wrestler entering the ring. First, his body is a representation of the strength, agility, and capability of his military. Second, his mind is a representation of the legitimacy and flexibility of his government. Third, his heart is a representation of the passion, desire and perseverance of his people. Every wrestler possesses all three characteristics, in varying strength and character, and all three are permanently linked in an obstinate manner. As long as the wrestler exists, the three characteristics exist, although at times it might appear that one or more have disappeared.

There is a balance in the wrestler’s trinity characterized metaphorically as an object suspended between three magnets of the trinity.<sup>81</sup> The location of that object is dependent on the wrestler, but every wrestler has a spot the object is most comfortable, and every wrestler knows if

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<sup>78</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 119; Echevarria, *Clausewitz & Contemporary War*, 69. The Howard and Paret translation of *On War* refers to a “paradoxical trinity”, however Echevarria translates ‘wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit’ as ‘wondrous trinity.’

<sup>79</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

<sup>80</sup> *JP-I*, I-1.

<sup>81</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89; Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War, a Biography*, 177-182.

the object is pulled away from that comfortable location. If the object shifts too far from its ‘sweet spot’, dangerously unpredictable and unforeseen events can result, often in a way in opposition to what the wrestler intends. The interplay of the three trinity forces produces its own friction. When two wrestlers grapple in the ring, two separate trinities mingle in a way that produces massive additional friction. The friction of each wrestler’s trinity and the mingling of two or more wrestler’s trinities each represent additional complex adaptive systems that revolve in an uncontrollable and wholly unpredictable way. History demonstrates it is impossible to control this friction.

### **War Defined *and* Described by Clausewitz**

The wrestling metaphor places war in a context free of the noise associated with 21<sup>st</sup> Century America and provides an effective, yet simple way of defining Clausewitzian war. The five points below are not as comprehensive as they could be if linked to a 200-page dissertation, but they are accessible. Balancing comprehensiveness with accessibility is necessary for usefulness. The intention is to illustrate as simply as possible a few eternal truths about war, these truths are critically important, for they are the essence of Clausewitz’s theory of war. They represent a thread that links all war since first recorded almost three thousand years ago. The first two are the essential requirements that define war, without which, Clausewitzian war does not exist. The last three are the essential descriptions of war according to Clausewitz. The existence of war defined by Clausewitz leads to the last three. According to Clausewitz, if you have the first two, you also get the last three.

First, war is a physically violent confrontation between two or more societies.<sup>82</sup> Without the complexity and friction associated with two or more opposing trinities locked in violent

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<sup>82</sup> Although the best single sentence definition of war, it is dangerous to assume war can be defined so simply. This definition is part of a larger, holistic framework. Society, in this context is defined

struggle, Clausewitz's theory fails to be relevant. Since a trinity is not possible without people, military capability, and leadership, what constitutes a wrestler is limited to identifiable social constructs whose purpose is to gain or maintain a chair in the arena.

Second, a link exists between the arena and the ring.<sup>83</sup> Since wrestlers are primarily interested in gaining or maintaining the best possible chair, the ring is just another venue within the arena for chair improvement and defense. Even wrestlers who are not in the ring have the ability to influence the ring's size, location, and the capability of the wrestlers in the ring, in order to strengthen their own, or weaken a perceived opponent's chair.

Third, entering the ring is a very unpredictable undertaking, regardless of the planning and perceived advantages prior to entering. Friction makes the ring ultimately uncontrollable.<sup>84</sup> Due to the friction associated with the shifting interplay of the trinities, the ring represents a complex system. A wrestler can apply overwhelming force yet gain a result completely converse to that effort.

Fourth, the ring is a dangerous place for a wrestler to attempt to improve his chair. On average, wrestlers who enter the ring, leave to discover a weakened chair, or themselves as wrestlers weakened to a point that future defense of their chair might be problematic. Even wrestlers who leave the ring to weave a narrative of decisive victory throughout the arena often ponder privately if their visit to the ring was ultimately unwise.

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as a structured community of people bound together by similar traditions, institutions, or nationality with the capability and willingness for collective violence.

<sup>83</sup> As mentioned earlier, generally, a chair is physically manifested by the nation-state model. Conceptually however, a chair represents a society's perceived self-determination and autonomy.

<sup>84</sup> The ring represents more than just a battle, or even a series of battles. Gaining the ability to control the outcome of a battle has been demonstrated throughout history, gaining the ability to control a war, has proven impossible.



Fifth, despite significant efforts throughout history to the contrary, and wrestlers fooled into thinking differently, there are no rules within the ring.<sup>85</sup> It is true that some wrestlers have mutually agreed to fight their battles by certain standards inside the ring. Sometimes standards are established in the course of the wrestling match as a sort of unwritten code. Unfortunately, wrestlers often use perceived rules from their last visit to the ring to prepare for their next visit. In the end, these self-imposed rules can become handicaps that are difficult to overcome. Additionally, a certain type of mind occasionally arises within a wrestler that allows that wrestler to perform astonishing feats within the ring.<sup>86</sup> The wrestler's ability to dictate the pace, tempo, and conduct within the ring is normally followed with intense interest by other wrestlers who often attempt to emulate the successful wrestler, sometimes by way of creating new rules and standards. Consequently, other wrestler's ability to recreate the feats meets diminishing success due to increased expectation.

The above points demonstrate that Clausewitz succeeded in his most important task, establishing a definitive description of war. So much of *On War* remains unfinished and questionably relevant, but the underpinning definition and description of war is present in its entirety. Clausewitz's greatest feat was providing a descriptive theory unattached to an agenda, personal or otherwise. In a world full of prescriptions, Clausewitz provides a welcome departure.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Rules in this context is defined as an authoritative principle set forth to guide behavior or action.

<sup>86</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 100. Clausewitz incorporated the concept of 'genius' as a central tenant in his theory of war, and therefore it cannot be ignored here. However, the prototypical genius, Napoleon, proved brilliant at reducing the fog of battle, but ultimately inadequate to the task of removing friction from war.

<sup>87</sup> Again, it is possible to prescribe principles to assist in winning battles, the best prescription for winning a war, however, might be to avoid prescription.

## Clausewitz, War, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century America

The manuscript on the conduct of major operations that will be found after my death can, in its present state, be regarded as nothing but a collection of materials from which a theory of war was to have been distilled.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.<sup>88</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to superimpose Clausewitz's definition and description of war with 21<sup>st</sup> Century America in order to demonstrate the importance of maintaining a coherent definition. Doing so may shed light on what America is doing today versus what America thinks it is doing.

### The Failure to Properly Define War

*Joint Publication 1* begins its definition of war with "War is socially sanctioned violence to achieve a political purpose. In its essence war is a violent clash of wills."<sup>89</sup> This is an inaccurate description of war. There are two primary errors with this definition. First, neither war, nor violence of any kind, must be socially sanctioned to exist.<sup>90</sup> The carpet bombing of cities, the use of weapons of mass destruction, the deliberate targeting of civilians, and many other forms of violence are clearly not sanctioned by all societies involved in war, or those observing. That war has been part of the World since before recorded history is not enough to consider it a sanctioned undertaking. The ability of societies to determine what they consider sanctionable is a critical variable to the Clausewitzian trinity regulating war. If war were

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<sup>88</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 70.

<sup>89</sup> *JP-1*, I-1.

<sup>90</sup> Socially sanctioning implies that societies, both individually and collectively, accept violence as legally acceptable conduct. Although international mandates and agreements have attempted to provide a legal framework for the conduct of war, history demonstrates very clearly the use of violence is anything but sanctioned.

definable by social sanctioning, there would be no such thing as a war criminal. Second, and most importantly, the definition provided by *JP-1* fails to emphasize that war must be between two separate groups of some base-line social collective. The *JP-1* definition does not include the fact that war requires two or more opposing trinities locked in violent struggle. It is therefore possible to include all sorts of clearly non war events in the *JP-1* definition, such as the Stalinist purges and collectivization murders of the 1930's, the Nazi-era genocide, Mao's Great Leap Forward, and current efforts to stop the importing of illicit drugs into America. All are definable as socially sanctioned violence to achieve a political purpose.

The last two sentences of the paragraph defining war in *JP-1* are not at all useful because they move past a characterization of war into a wholly out of place reference to the conduct of war by a commander.<sup>91</sup> These two sentences do nothing but confuse a paragraph so critical to providing a start point, a grounding mechanism that must remain immovable in the current environment where so many overlapping lens make it is so difficult to focus.

It is prudent for *JP-1* to refer to Clausewitz in its definition of war, but it fails to provide an explanation for that invocation or link Clausewitz to the opening sentences. Clausewitz is just too mysterious and inaccessible for most readers to assume that glossing over his theoretical concepts is enough. The definition provided by *JP-1* would be acceptable, albeit dangerously inappropriate, if there was no reference to Clausewitz. When invoking Clausewitzian theory, *JP-1* fails to demonstrate an appreciation of his understanding of war. The result is a definition that is convoluted. As the next chapter will establish, if Clausewitz is used, a better description of war is as a violent clash between two or more identifiable social groups for the purpose of policy, marked by the emergence of fog, friction, and genius. The definition of war provided by *FM 3-*

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<sup>91</sup> *JP-1*, I-1. The last two sentences state, "These observations remain true today and place a burden on the commander (CDR) to remain responsive, versatile, and adaptive in real time to seize opportunities and reduce vulnerabilities. This is the art of war." This statement illustrates an attempt to use Clausewitz's theory to provide validation to a divergent concept.

24, *Counterinsurgency* demonstrates an understanding of Clausewitz, “Warfare remains a violent clash of interests between organized groups characterized by the use of force.”<sup>92</sup>

Clausewitz understood that it is essential to remove war from the present milieu. Given so many competing and conflicting requirements, prejudices, and demands on a modern society, the decision to wage war is often devoid of a grounding apparatus. That Clausewitz found it necessary to apply a metaphor almost two-hundred years ago is a demonstration of the need for a mechanism that takes current necessities into a more philosophical and simplified condition to identify fundamental truth.

### **Is Al Qaeda a Wrestler?**

In order to ascertain if a war is occurring, it is important to determine if a wrestler is entering a ring against another wrestler, or simply attempting to create a ring where one should not exist. The United States is currently debating this on several levels regarding a threat known as Al Qaeda. To be a functioning wrestler in a ring, Al Qaeda must possess a trinity of mind, body, and heart. Additionally, if it is a wrestler in the ring, there must be a link between the wrestler and the arena, a policy goal to gain or maintain a chair. If any one of those things does not exist, war, as Clausewitz defined it, does not exist, and attempting to apply Clausewitzian theory to the threat is the wrong approach.

In 2001, when Al Qaeda attacked the United States and became well known as a threat inside the arena, it possessed a mind, consisting of the leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, a body consisting of Soldiers, training bases, weapons, and doctrine, and a base of support spread among several nations and disparate population groups.<sup>93</sup> Al Qaeda also created

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<sup>92</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency*, (Washington D.C., GPO, 2006), I-1.

<sup>93</sup> Although support for Al Qaeda is spread unevenly throughout the Islamic world, certain areas such as significant parts of the Arabian Peninsula and parts of Egypt and Pakistan contain populations of

an ambitious and clearly articulated policy that linked it to a desire to gain a chair in the arena.<sup>94</sup>

From an historical perspective, Al Qaeda is no different from many wrestlers that existed in the arena over the years. Due to clearly articulated policies, it actually possesses more focus and discipline than many other wrestlers with or without a chair. What made Al Qaeda unique was that its heart was not limited to a particular geographic location, but spread out over a large area and somewhat difficult to identify in the traditional method. The spreading of the heart is due to technological capabilities only made possible in the past twenty or so years. This led to some confusion among analysts trained to identify a more traditional wrestler, so many discounted Al Qaeda as a wrestler. However, Al Qaeda's inability to fight the American wrestler in a Western tradition, claim a specific geographically definable area, or use religion in a central role does not mean it is not a wrestler. According to Clausewitz, Al Qaeda has the ability to enter a ring for the purpose of gaining a chair, therefore it is appropriate to apply Clausewitzian theory to the conduct of the ring. The five points he uses to define and describe war apply to Al Qaeda.

## **The Ring Changes a Wrestler**

What has happened to the Al Qaeda wrestler since 2001 is also in debate. It is clear now that by 2002, the United States wrestler, applying an effective strategy, severely crippled the original Al Qaeda wrestler by way of a campaign against its mind, body, and heart. Although greatly reduced in its capability to fight inside the ring, the United States wrestler has been unable to destroy the original Al Qaeda wrestler, it still possesses the leadership, military, and support

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support where their desire for an Islamic caliphate overrides their loyalty to an established nation-state, hence the body portion of the Al Qaeda wrestler.

<sup>94</sup> See Seyyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New York: Kazi Publications, 2007) and David Gaubatz, "The Strategy and Objectives of Al Qaeda," *American Thinker* (February 9, 2007), American Thinker website, [http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/the\\_strategy\\_and\\_objectives\\_of.html](http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/02/the_strategy_and_objectives_of.html) [accessed March 3, 2010].

required to exist as a wrestler. The size and capability of the al Qaeda wrestler's trinity is certainly in question, but no more so than in past wars when wrestlers appeared near defeat.

What emerged since 2002 are several other wrestlers, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>95</sup> Making it difficult for the United States wrestler is that some of these emerging wrestlers are hiding under the chairs of other wrestlers and attempting to defeat them might lead to the accidental emergence of unintended rings. Another possibility is that some of these new wrestlers might be sharing a common heart, another interesting result of new technologies. Additionally, in order to confuse the traditional U.S. wrestler, these new wrestlers are also claiming to be part of the original wrestler. Further confusing the ring where the United States and Al Qaeda currently fight, are several other wrestlers. In an attempt to gain access to the Al Qaeda wrestler, the United States dragged the Taliban wrestler into the ring along with the Northern Alliance wrestler, and later found itself in the ring with a number of other wrestlers such as the Pushtun and Baluchi wrestlers. The United States is now in a crowded ring and at times unable to differentiate between wrestlers, it often finds itself fighting a wrestler that it does not necessarily need to fight. The developments inside this ring validate the complexity and unpredictability of the rings as described by Clausewitz.

### **Iraq and the United States in the Ring, a Case Study**

The war beginning in 2003 between the United States and Iraq represents an effective case study for determining if war as defined and described by Clausewitz is still a relevant theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. First, to determine if a war as Clausewitz defined existed, the wrestling metaphor is a useful tool. The war between Iraq and the United States represented two wrestlers

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<sup>95</sup> Bryan Bender, "Specter Surfaces of World of Local Qaeda Offshoots," *The Boston Globe*, (July 8, 2005).

entering a ring. It was a physically violent confrontation between two or more opponents as required by Clausewitzian theory. Both wrestlers represented the three factors required, a mind, body, and heart. Additionally, both wrestlers maintained a clear link between the ring and their chair in the arena, so the 2003 war represented a connection between warfare and policy, as required by Clausewitz. The United States wrestler focused on chair improvement, wanting to end a perceived threat to his chair while the Iraqi wrestler focused on simply maintaining his chair. It is clear that what occurred in 2003 was war as defined by Clausewitz. What happened next was unanticipated by the U.S. wrestler. In 2003 and 2004, after the fall of the Iraqi wrestler, new wrestlers entered the ring; a Shi'a wrestler, Sunni wrestler, Kurdish wrestler (the Kurdish wrestler already existed, but was freed from his wrestling match with the Iraqi wrestler), and an Al Qaeda in Iraq wrestler. All of the wrestlers who entered the ring possessed a trinity of mind, body, and heart, each ultimately motivated by a desire to gain a chair. The ring may have changed, but Clausewitzian war remained.

Next, it is important to evaluate the three descriptions of war that Clausewitz argues link to his definition. If the three descriptions are not identifiable, then it is possible to argue that Clausewitzian theory is losing validity.

First, was the 2003 war an unpredictable undertaking? From the beginning, both wrestlers misjudged the other wrestler, leading to immediate problems. The Iraqi wrestler did not think the American wrestler wanted to separate him from its chair, only punish him and allow him to return to his chair.<sup>96</sup> The American wrestler misjudged the character of the Iraqi wrestler's trinity, thinking it could win the match by defeating only the mind of the wrestler, while neutralizing the body, and ignoring the heart. There was, however, a decisive victory in the ring

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<sup>96</sup> Lily Hindy, "Interrogator: Saddam didn't think U.S. would invade Iraq," *Democracy Forums*, (January 26, 2008), <http://www.democracyforums.com/showthread.php?t=9685> [accessed 3 February 2010].

resulting in the Iraqi wrestler's almost immediate defeat. Both wrestlers were somewhat surprised by this turn of events. The victory resulted from the American wrestler's overwhelming strength, agility, and capability. The American wrestler claimed victory, but the Iraqi wrestler did not die immediately, his mind, body, and heart still existed, albeit in a greatly reduced manner. It was not until seven months later that the American wrestler claimed final victory over the Iraqi wrestler by destroying his mind, and therefore collapsing his trinity. By this time, the new wrestlers had entered the ring. For an extended period, the American wrestler claimed, and actually believed, there was no ring. The dynamics of the fighting between the various new wrestlers caused the ring to become a wholly confused and unpredictable place for several years. It took that long for the American wrestler to simply identify each wrestler and determine whom each wrestler was fighting.<sup>97</sup> This unpredictability was not limited to the American wrestler. The Al Qaeda in Iraq wrestler would certainly agree that their near total destruction in 2007 was entirely unanticipated.<sup>98</sup> There can be little argument that the wrestling ring America entered in 2003 validates the unpredictability theory described by Clausewitz.

Second, was the 2003 ring a dangerous place for the wrestlers to attempt to improve their chair? The original ring involved only one wrestler attempting to improve his chair. The Iraqi wrestler was not attempting to improve his chair, only protect it, so the fact that he lost his chair is irrelevant to this point. The American wrestler on the other hand was clearly interested in improving his chair, and used war for that end. It was not that he was looking for a better chair, but a chair in a better corner of the arena, protected and safe from perceived enemies. In early 2003, he was so confident in the idea that he could move his chair without danger that he failed to

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<sup>97</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *RAND National Security Research Division Occasional Paper*, (June 2004): 16-18.

<sup>98</sup> Zvi Lanir, "Fundamental Surprises," (Center for Strategic Studies, The University of Tel Aviv, 2006), 28-32.



prepare for the danger Clausewitz theorized.<sup>99</sup> The conduct of the war, continuing in 2010, its expense in blood and treasure, and its resulting degradation in American respect in the arena, show that the ring remains an extraordinarily dangerous place to improve a chair.

Third, were there rules inside the ring? If a rule is defined as a principle to govern conduct, the answer is no, because to be a rule it must be applied throughout the ring. The American and Iraqi wrestlers entered the ring utilizing strategies that both could generally understand, if not properly counter.<sup>100</sup> The Iraqis attempted, with only limited success, a few new strategies of their own, to the consternation of the American wrestler.<sup>101</sup> But strategies are not rules. With the destruction of the Iraqi wrestler, and the emergence of new wrestlers, the conduct of the ring changed. Strategies existed, but not rules. The only identifiable rule permeating the entire ring was survival and an attempt to gain a chair. This created difficulties for an American wrestler who, due to his own history and not an understanding of the history of the ring, attempted to apply a set of rules, but ultimately only to him. Rules applied to one wrestler and not another in the ring are not rules, but handicaps. Applying handicaps when fighting certain wars might be necessary, yet it is still not a rule. Therefore, Clausewitz was right to articulate that rules do not exist inside a ring, only links to the arena.

An analysis of the seven-year war in Iraq demonstrates nothing that indicates even an updating of Clausewitzian theory is necessary. The definition and descriptions of war he

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<sup>99</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 90. America learned that the destruction of an enemy army and the occupation of a nation does not mean the end of a war. As Clausewitz stated “both these things may be done and the reciprocal effects of hostile elements, cannot be considered to have ended as long as the enemy’s *will* has not been broken.” Author’s emphasis.

<sup>100</sup> The United States developed a comprehensive plan to win the *battle* against Iraq using the principles of war outlined in *FM 3-0*, A1-A4. In the context of Clausewitz’s definition of war, these are principles of battle, not war.

<sup>101</sup> Much is written about the rise of Napoleon up to 1807 and his subsequent decline through 1815 as armies, nations, and peoples adjusted to the new paradigm. It is possible the same might be true for America today.

articulated 180 years ago are perfectly acceptable today. Technologies and eras change, societies come and go, people promise new ideas will fundamentally alter everything we believe, but Clausewitz remains a constant. His relevance appears eternal, much to the chagrin of so many pundits attempting to knock him from his perch.

## **Lessons From Clausewitzian Theory**

If Clausewitz is still relevant, as *J P-I* and this paper so obviously suggests, then simply exploring his definition of war can provide immediate instruction to the United States in the context of its current conflict.

The first lesson is simply to ask; is the United States fighting a war? Trying to fight a war when one does not exist is problematic. Without a good definition however, it is a dangerous possibility. Calling something war in order to rally support is one thing, applying Clausewitzian theory to that “war” is another thing altogether. A definition is essential to avoid drifting into troubled water.

The second lesson Clausewitzian war can teach America today is that the true nature of war has not fundamentally changed since before the time of Thucydides. Every argument made today that war is somehow different are all superficial and peripheral to a deeper unchanging understanding. The critics arguing war is somehow different today are not dissimilar from the air power theorists, nuclear warfare calamitists, and Vietnam post-modernists of generations past. Clausewitz survived all previous attempts to redefine war and he will surely outlive all the present day prophesiers. That the definition is not easy does not make it unsuitable. As stated by William F. Owen, “War is not changing. The aims and purpose of organized violence for

political gain are enduring and unchanging.”<sup>102</sup> Clausewitz’s desire was not to define war in the context of post-Napoleonic Europe, but provide a definition for all time. This he did very well, especially when considered holistically. Throughout history, nations repeatedly attempted to redefine war in the narrow framework of present conditions. This is a failure made by the United States in Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In all cases, the wars involved two or more wrestlers in a ring, ultimately attempting to improve their chair. The United States discovered and then rediscovered in three of those rings that war is an unpredictable event that cannot be mastered.<sup>103</sup> In the fourth ring, an overwhelming knock-out blow at the beginning of the wrestling match was so seductive that it hid the fact that the United States did not ultimately improve its chair, and eventually had to return to the ring.<sup>104</sup> There is no indication that the United States learned the lessons of attempting to redefine war from its last four visits to the ring. In contrast, it appears that America is only attempting to improve upon what it has failed to do in the past. Improving upon failure can only result in yet another fundamental surprise.

The third lesson Clausewitz can teach America today is that his trinity works both ways. If the United States decides upon war, it must appreciate its own and its opponent’s trinity and constantly evaluate the shifting balance of the will of the people, the capability of the military, and the determination of the government. The United States cannot go to war with only a portion of its trinity and expect a healthy outcome. Likewise, simply wishing away part of an enemy’s trinity does not make it go away. During the Iraq War, America not only ignored the will of the Iraqi people, but also facilitated its dramatic morphing into several wrestlers. Unprecedented capability to wage war by using a devastatingly effective and precise military only compounds

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<sup>102</sup> William F. Owen, “Why Military History Trumps Buzzwords,” *Armed Forces Journal*, (November 2009), Armed Forces Journal Website, <http://www.afji.com/2009/4114043> [accessed March 12, 2010].

<sup>103</sup> Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

<sup>104</sup> The 1991 Persian Gulf War.

the problem by causing the crisis to emerge more rapidly. If the purpose of war is, as Clausewitz states, “to compel our enemy to do our will,” subjectively applying pressure on only portions of the enemy trinity is probably the most effective short-term operational concept, but least effective long-term strategy. The question of course is which is more important?

The fourth lesson the United States can learn from Clausewitz today is that war has no rules. Prior to decisively committing to war, leaders and planners must force themselves to consider and reconsider their assumptions. Assumptions based on the expectation of a predictable outcome to an unpredictable concept such as trinity interaction must be exposed. Furthermore, presupposing that an adversary will accept defeat based solely on the outcome of one or more battles is a dangerous assumption. The adversary is not just a government, or just a military, or even both. It includes the entire social construct. In most cases, the United States possesses the capability to control the outcome of battles, but battles are not wars. Mistaking the two is to understand war poorly. Holistically, war remains anarchic, and operating under that fact is the only sure way to prevent assumptions from becoming surprises.

## Conclusion

The man who sacrifices the possible for the impossible is a fool.

-Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.<sup>105</sup>

War is definable as a violent clash between two or more identifiable social groups for the purpose of policy, marked by the emergence of fog, friction, and genius. Defining war in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is critically important for America; it is an essential start point for everything the United States does in the international arena. Without a proper definition, the application of all elements

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<sup>105</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 637.

of national power in a dangerously inefficient manner results. An accurate, accepted, and properly utilized definition has two important benefits. First, it allows senior leaders and policy makers preparing for war to better understand what they are getting into, and second, it allows Soldiers fighting war to better understand what is happening. Ultimately, properly using Clausewitz to define war can succeed in preventing fundamental surprise, but what might seem to be an easy task has proven difficult for the United States Military. A definition that uses Clausewitz must understand and appreciate Clausewitz, not simply use his name as intellectual capital.

This paper is not intended to disprove other theories, but to demonstrate that Clausewitz defines and describes war exceptionally well. War, according to Clausewitz, represents a certain combination of factors that, if absent, make it something other than war. Therefore, the *JP-1* definition is not appropriate, comprehensive, or easily understandable. It spreads the definition into inappropriate territory. The United States must lock its definition of war in stone, and stop allowing an undisciplined conglomeration of intellectual noise to interfere with historic logic. Any perceived changes in the conduct of war must be anchored by this definition while remembering that an ability to succeed on the battlefield is only a part of what makes up war.

A definition of war cannot be as easy as a one-paragraph suggestion briefly glanced over and forgotten. It requires an educational process for all leaders and policy makers. Experienced Soldiers have a legitimate reason to desire that education for themselves, and for their civilian masters. A proper definition must serve as an anchor for anyone involved in determining if military force is necessary. If the purpose of the U.S. military is to win its nations wars, it must remain focused on a holistic understanding of war, not focused solely on the battlefield, or as Admiral Mullen recommends, “the minds of the people.” Our opponents are made up of more than that. Failure is only a poorly understood wrestling match away.

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